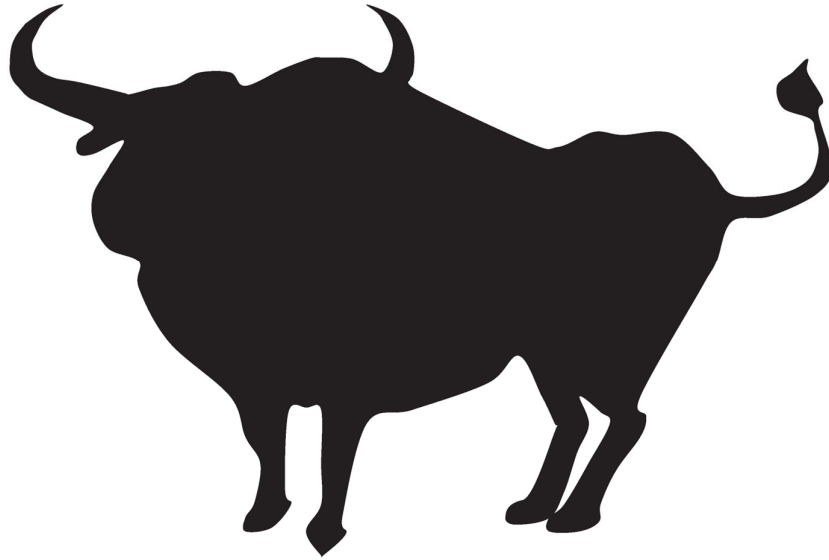


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**Is it true that your society has done little
to address the problem of mental health?**

‘Suicides in Singapore up 10% last year, record high for boys...’ This was the newspaper headline that emerged on local media just weeks ago to the shock and apprehension of many netizens. With a majority of the suicide cases believed to have also been suffering from a form of mental illness, this newest number is the latest among a series of statistical trends that highlight the growing mental health problem in Singapore. With a 2016 Singapore mental health study confirming that 1 in 7 in Singapore will experience a mental disorder in one’s lifetime, the urgency of the problem is tangibly felt by citizens and policymakers alike. Because the issue is relatively new, many believe that our society has not made much effort to stem the problem, thus contributing to the rising trend of cases. However, I believe it must be acknowledged that while more can be done to bolster our efforts to not only tackle poor mental health, but also support those with mental health conditions, our society has made considerable effort to address the issue on a state, community and individual level.

Proponents of the opposing claim argue Singapore has done little to tackle the problem of mental health on the grounds that stigmatisation of mental health issues still persist in the current day. In a published study by the Institute of Mental Health Singapore, 75% of respondents agreed with the statement that they would feel ashamed of telling their family members if they had a mental illness, and this reflects the dominant entrenched mindset in Singapore that labels mental health problems as a sign of personal weakness and failing rather than a medical condition that often originates from a complex range of factors. The existence of such a stigma is arguably evidence that prevailing efforts have been insignificant in truly addressing the problem. On top of this, MediSave’s and MediShield Life’s disproportionate limits on physical health coverage as opposed to mental health treatments further signal to the public that mental health may not be regarded as equally important as tangible and visible physical ailments. A statement by Nominated Member of Parliament Ms Anthea Indira Ong at the start of the year cited how poor accessibility to affordable psychiatric treatment in Singapore relegates those with mental health conditions to wait an average of 28 days just for one consultation session, which delays their process of

recovery. Clearly, then, taking into account the inadequate support rendered to those with mental health conditions, coupled with entrenched stigmatisation against mental illnesses, those who take the opposing stand say little has been done to address the problem of mental health.

While it is true structural issues like affordability and accessibility to mental healthcare form barriers to help-seeking behaviour, which might impede our society's ability to address the problem head on, it must be acknowledged that while specific systems still have shortcomings, the very fact this issue was raised in parliament, supported by research Ms Ong's team had collated over the past year, shows that considerable resources have been expended to gain a better understanding on the issue. Furthermore, stigmatisation is a symptom of deeply rooted cognitive biases and mindsets that are a result of societal values and upbringing – these are intangible forces that take years to change. Hence it would be simplistic to conclude little has been done to address the problem based on the fact a problem still exists. In fact, there has been a tremendous surge in efforts in recent years to slowly but surely address wellness in Singapore.

On a governmental level, preventive steps have been taken to enhance the quality and accessibility of mental health education in Singapore. Minister Indranee Rajah just announced last year that the Character and Citizenship Education curriculum will expand to include key concepts on mental health literacy in 2021. To enhance these efforts, the Ministry of Education engagement team has organised numerous dialogues and programmes like 'What's Your Take – Youth Edition', which encourages like-minded youths passionate about mental health to offer their insights and implement new solutions, with up to \$3000 of funding for projects. On top of this, MOE will also develop comprehensive peer support structures in all schools by 2022. These unprecedented nationwide changes make Singapore one of the first countries in the world to provide compulsory mental health education to its students. Equipping students with the necessary knowledge and skills to not only exercise self-care, but also extend the same compassion outwards towards their peers in an effort to promote one another's wellbeing is a crucial effort in tackling the mental health problem. Knowledge students learn, like the symptoms of mental health conditions to look out for and the appropriate language to use are life skills that will be essential in the long run when they enter the workforce. Allowing exposure to mental health issues at a young age from an educational standpoint is the first step to building a social capital that understands the importance of mental wellbeing. Through strengthening networks of care and concern, it furthermore actualises the vision of a 'caring Singapore society' so often coined by our nation's leaders, by encouraging Singaporeans to be pillars of support for one another rather than shun one another

for our differences. Complementing these efforts, the recent establishment of mindline.sg by the Ministry of Health is a one-stop resource platform allowing people to assess their mental state through a series of questions and provides resources for help and other tips all in our place. These efforts show our government has certainly levelled up their efforts to address the national issue.

Apart from the government, civil society has played a vital role in advocacy for good mental health. Making up for the gaps in our current mental health landscape, certain charities and Voluntary Welfare Organisations have benevolently offered subsidised, or even free treatments to the people from lower socio-economic strata. The significance of allowing timely, affordable access to medicinal drugs like antidepressants should not be underestimated. To some, medicine is essential for one's smooth functioning in their daily routine without having to suffer from extreme mood swings, anxiety or disruptive symptoms of their conditions. This directly impacts their labour force participation and gives them the capacity to be active contributing citizens to our economy – a form of empowerment that is absolutely essential in not just allowing people with conditions to live purposefully, but also in changing society's perception of such individuals as incapable and weak. Civil Society groups like the Community Health Assessment Team (CHAT) and Samaritans of Singapore offer online helplines and chatting sessions for social workers to directly converse with people with mental health conditions. Allowing real time counselling at any hour of the day regardless of location allows provision of support while preserving individuals' anonymity. This makes it more likely for people to step forward and seek help, without fear of being ostracised by others. Other groups like The Positive Movement, The Resilience Collective and Campus PSY also offer workshops imparting healthy coping mechanisms like mindfulness or emotional regulation for its attendees, and offer psychological resources that build emotional resilience promote a culture of self-care in Singapore. This is just as important as providing support for those with mental health conditions because emphasising the importance of mental health care early on can play a part in allowing individuals to adopt proper coping strategies in the face of a changing, volatile world full of pressures and expectations.

Last but not least, individuals themselves have become more willing to actively champion the value of mental health. A recent survey by National Council of Social Services saw that 89% of young people aged 20 to 35 are willing to support a friend with a mental health condition. With the rise of youth-led mental health community projects like @selfcaresingapore on Instagram, those run by the Youth Corps Singapore under the leaders programme as well as the recent Youth Mental Wellbeing Network by Ministry of Social and Family Development that comprises over 1000 youths, Singapore has seen a huge influx in ground-up initiatives and programmes

committed to addressing the issue of mental health through promoting empathy for people with lived experiences and encouraging greater dialogue and awareness about the issue.

Be it governmental advisories like the Tripartite Guidelines for Fair Employment Practices for people with mental health conditions, large-scale social media campaigns such as Beyond the Label or Silver Ribbon, or even small ground up projects that advocate positive mental health within schools, together with the support of Student Welfare Officers and guidance counsellors, Singapore is making big leaps to address the severe problem of mental health in Singapore. While we still have a long way to go, our endeavours are positive indications that we are on the path to creating an environment which prioritises personal wellbeing over pragmatic considerations like efficiency and productivity.

Marker's comments:

You clearly are very up to date with the mental health initiatives in Singapore, and this knowledge comes through in your arguments. Points are well substantiated, with relevant and concrete examples in a variety of contexts. To improve, ensure your topic sentences are clear so you do not look like you are merely listing examples and forcing the examiner to infer the overarching point. A wide range of vocabulary and expressions with very few errors made. This an engaging read.

**'As long as economic goals remain a priority,
the environment is a lost cause.' Comment.**

"It is not too late to admit that we have failed." Greta Thunberg's solemn warning poignantly underlines our government's obsession with economic growth that has come at the expense of our environment. On the one hand, the California Wildfires and hurricanes and their unprecedented scale have birthed a newfound sense of urgency. These warnings have led to the increased profitability of environmentally friendly industries, giving us a glimmer of hope that it is possible to simultaneously enjoy economic growth and preserve our environment. Despite the burgeoning potential of environmental businesses, most countries continue to swim in endless swathes of coal and environmental destruction. Encumbered by circumstance and blinded by wealth, these countries rebuke mounting evidence on the negative impacts of climate change.

Developing countries that lag behind in Gross Domestic Product and economic growth rates cannot afford the relative luxury of caring for the climate. As economic growth remains their foremost priority, traditionally efficient energy resources such as coal and fossil fuels often produce the most profit due to the presence of existing infrastructure and extensive investments in coal-mining. As such, countries that hunger for economic growth are forced to prioritise domestic needs at the cost of environmental welfare. Such is the case in India, where coal is responsible for the livelihoods of the poorest regions, their sole source of growth. Despite pledging to reduce carbon intensity by 35% by 2030 at the Paris Climate Conference in 2015, this task has become a herculean one as India struggles to find alternative industries that can promote growth as reliably as their coal industry. Their coal-producing regions are relatively poorer, as seen in how Jharkhand, the largest coal-producing state, is ranked 19th in statewide GDP. Inadvertently, the government is forced to choose between economic growth and environmental destruction, as coal is single-handedly responsible for the lion's share of their emission of greenhouse gases. As a government's responsibility is to the people they serve, the choice is clear: watch California immolate itself while India grasps at prosperity. Hence, economic growth and environmental welfare continues to be a strict trade-off.

Besides developing countries, many developed countries also consciously make the choice to forgo our planet for the sake of continued prosperity. As global competition ensues, governments are practically unhinged as they scramble to raise net export levels and economic growth, and are relentless in their pursuit of higher production levels and lower costs. This ravenous desire for economic growth fuels the proliferation of fossil fuels, which is presently the only source capable of satisfying the rapacious appetites of developed countries. Despite claims by Germany to be carbon neutral by 2050, they have continued to pay fiscal subsidies of \$2.4 billion per year for coal. The G20, considered to be at the forefront of development, spends up to \$15.4 billion per year on coal subsidies, showing how affluence generates more hunger for rapid economic growth, propelling a vicious cycle. The environment is merely a sideshow, where leaders step on podiums and cut ribbons to the rhythm of climate activists marching on the streets. At the end of the day, the question most governments would like to ask climate activists is: why march on the streets for the earth when you can be the victor of economic growth in this dog-eat-dog world?

While our governments seem to have gone morally bankrupt in the face of wealth, there are instances where economic goals and environmental welfare can be achieved simultaneously. As climate disasters proliferate, investors are starting to turn towards sustainable assets that are environmentally friendly, as public dissent for solely profit-driven enterprises rise. A McKinsey study has found that a majority of investors today judge a company based on their ethical principles and causes they believe in. This is further supported by a 2019 Pew survey showing that 25% of American citizens are now part of the “issue public” for climate change, up from 7% in 1997, where they extensively participate in the climate conversation and are willing to fund lobbying groups to promote such causes. Hence, countries highly reliant on investments have made the move to rebrand themselves as environmentally-friendly. For example, Singapore has made a commitment to reduce its carbon intensity by 36% in 2030, and has encouraged the development of environmentally friendly air-conditioning, which can be found even in older complexes such as the Joo Chiat Complex, saving them on over 500 tonnes of carbon emissions, enough to power 125 HDB 4-room flats. All these have made Singapore emerge as one of the top 5 places for investment globally. Thus, we see how preserving the integrity of our planet can be a pathway to continued economic growth, and focusing on GDP does not always cause the planet to crash and burn in heat waves.

Finally, foreign aid can help developing countries prosper whilst focusing on the environment. With a new wave of developing countries emerging on the horizon, developed countries with available research and viable methods at hand have a responsibility to help save the environment, as they concern everyone, and hence

every country has an equal responsibility. Such can be seen in the Belt and Road initiative, where China has helped Pakistan to build a Nehru Tim Mu Hydropower Station to make up for its 500 million megawatt electricity deficit. As Pakistan is knee-deep in trying to lift the country out of poverty, China's support has become crucial in ensuring sustainable economic growth as the hydropower station is entirely environmentally friendly. In principle, economic goals can coexist with the environment if there is adequate support from countries with more resources.

In conclusion, economic growth tends to be prioritised by governments, even at the cost of the environment. However, it is perhaps inevitable that the governments of tomorrow will be forced to take both into equal consideration as climate disasters wreak havoc and disrupt economic growth. The US National Resources Defense Council estimates the climate disruption budget to be \$100 billion. When disasters are quantified in terms of monetary losses, the world is thrown into a frenzy, and by then, we can only hope that our last-minute efforts are sufficient, as governments and people of today are blindsided by endless tales of economic prosperity. While there is a glimmer of hope, perhaps we must be equally relentless in our advocacy for the environment as we contend with polarizing leadership figures such as Trump who view climate change as a hoax.

Marker's comments:

Shimin, I enjoyed reading this essay for the fully relevant arguments you've offered, strengthened in turn by an insightful understanding of these issues involved and your excellent content knowledge. Well done! Excellent linguistic ability has been shown in this essay too; I was impressed not only with your assured use of vocabulary and felicitous expression, but with your imaginative yet fully apt use of imagery and other stylistic devices such as rhetorical questions as an inventive means of reiterating your arguments.

‘Race has no place in politics today.’ How far do you agree?

“I have a dream that one day, our children will be judged not by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character.” This was the vision Civil Rights movement leader Martin Luther King Jr. espoused in the 1960s, when he advocated equal rights for African-Americans and an end to segregation. These events may now seem distant in time, but the fact that minority communities in the United States continue to be disproportionately affected by issues such as police brutality, and have had to rise up in protest as recently as this year in defence of their most basic rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is surely a potent symbol of just how little things change. Race continues to be inextricably intertwined with politics today, in countries as far apart as South Sudan and Indonesia. While we may aspire to a “colour blind” society, that is, a society that ignores racial divisions, there is no way to confront the real issues that minority communities face without taking race into account.

It is certainly very easy to say that race should have no place in politics today. Governments tend to encourage national unity, and bar the ones that do so by uniting in persecution of some internal minority, the simplest method to do so is naturally to encourage people to forsake their own disparate identities in favour of a national one. It must be admitted that the prospect of a world without the divisions of race is a deeply attractive one, in the sense that it entails a breaking down of barriers and joining hands in unity. In an ideal world, this would lead to the disappearance of racial discrimination - it is not difficult to find comments from people in countries all over the world decrying the divisiveness of politicians who stir up racial sentiments and drive wedges in what is supposedly a community living in peace and harmony. Perhaps it is simply easier to point to a problem at the top than to recognise that it originates from the bottom.

The fundamental issue with the belief that taking race out of politics will create a better world is the presupposition that everyone starts off equal - that no one faces an inherent advantage or disadvantage as a result of their ethnic background. Since this is clearly not the case in the world we live in today, the net effect of taking race out of politics is simply to erase the struggles of minorities who are disadvantaged as a result of their racial origins. When the Black Lives Matter movement against police killings of

African-Americans began gaining traction in 2014, a countermovement also rose in opposition to it, with the slogan “All Lives Matter”. The true meaning of this slogan was perhaps most ironically illustrated by a video from earlier this year, showing a supporter of the “All Lives Matter” movement shouting this slogan while aiming a crossbow at an African-American man. Even in Singapore, a country that prides itself on multiracialism and cordial interethnic relations, official statistics show that the average Singaporean Malay household earns an income one-third less than the national average. In societies across the globe, minorities do face discrimination, and constant steps must be taken to correct for this if we are ever to progress past the issues of race. To argue that race has no place in politics today is at best a naive belief in a world with spherical cows in a vacuum, and at worst a bad faith attempt to suck the oxygen out of minority communities who are struggling to have their demands for equal treatment heard.

Just because race is not talked about does not mean there is nothing wrong with the state of racial relations. Here, it may be useful to bring in another set of concepts from the Civil Rights era - positive and negative peace. To put it simply, positive peace entails a relationship that exists as the result of the presence of justice, where injustices and imbalances are made right so everyone enjoys equal treatment, and society moves past divisions of race because they are inconsequential and immaterial in fact. Negative peace, on the other hand, is a state of affairs where a tension exists, where no one discriminated against dares to speak up for fear of suppression. While both states show politics that are not defined by race, the reasons for and consequences of their existence could not possibly be more different. In Indonesia, a country that prides itself on “Unity in Diversity”, for example, protests broke out on the island of Papua in 2019, as natives claimed transmigrants from Java were receiving preferential treatment. One key flashpoint in this matter was the use of the derogatory term “*monyet*” (“monkey”) in reference to the dark-skinned Papuans, creating a stir even in Jakarta, where an English newspaper warned that unless discrimination against ethnic minorities in the country was brought under control, Papua would see Indonesia as Indonesia saw the Dutch within a few decades - as cruel, oppressive colonisers. Whether a country can successfully separate politics from race depends on whether a situation of positive or negative peace exists - and very few countries are even close to a state of positive peace.

Lastly, race continues to be inextricable from politics because of the sensitivities of minorities. The one example closest to home is Thailand, where the proper term to refer to oneself in the presence of the King is “servant of the Holy Lord Buddha”, a term clearly unacceptable to the country’s Muslim minority. These linguistic terms, which would come naturally to the national majority, face great resistance among

minorities with their own culture that prevents them from behaving exactly like the rest of the population. In a country where race is swept under the rug in the political realm, Thailand's Muslims would likely have been told to use the term anyway, but the raising of this issue compelled alternative terms to be found for their use, so they could be respectful in the presence of the King without offending their religion.

Race may be a social construct, but that does not mean it is inconsequential. Ultimately, politics are a reflection of society, and the day society itself moves past racial division, it will be possible to say race has no place in politics. Until then, however, it is important that racial issues continue to be raised to aid in the fight against discrimination and hasten the arrival of this day.

Marker's comments:

This is such an enjoyable read and so clearly and succinctly argued and there is little to fault. Your logic is compelling (maybe a small error of judgment in the penultimate paragraph). I'm especially impressed by the nuances you can pack into an example whose details have been well-chosen to make your points clear and insightful. All the best.

On another note, you may want to check out black conservatives like Thomas Sowell, Larry Elder, Walter E. Williams and Candace Owens for a more holistic survey of the African-American political demographic. Learn to follow evidence and less the narrative of systemic racism.

**'In today's world, only scientific research
with practical value is worth funding.' Discuss.**

"Do no Evil." Though Google's official motto was developed when it was still a nascent company with little inkling of the technological powerhouse it would soon become, it nonetheless sought to create Project Dragonfly, a search engine compatible with China's state censorship provision. Though this project was ultimately terminated, this incident reflected the ethos of most technological firms today: a willingness to exchange ethical considerations and moral courage in pursuit of relentless profits. Companies and governments are only willing to fund scientific research if it helps to solve practical problems or if there are profits to be reaped. However, I believe that this view is too myopic and parochial. Scientific research allows humans to discover the secrets of the universe: it has long term benefits that are unseen in the short term.

It must first be acknowledged that we live in the current world, faced with practical problems that demand our immediate attention. Global problems like food shortages, energy crises and the threat of rogue nations require funding to solve. Scientific research in food production has yielded promising results such as the Green Revolution and the development of genetically modified crops that help to feed our increasing population. With 10 billion mouths to satisfy by 2050, it is understandable why governments and private companies are frantically pumping money into food research. Declining fossil fuel availability and serious climate change implications have urged scientific research in clean, sustainable energy sources. Europe is making a collective effort to develop the world's first generator of nuclear fission energy. While such technology already exists, not a single prototype has yielded a net positive of electricity, making it currently unfeasible. However, with energy demand set to rise 1.5 times by 2030, the world needs to address the limitations of current energy production. Rogue nations need to be kept in check to prevent the collapse of the precarious international balance. The 7 countries that signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action against Iran further enriching uranium have developed sophisticated and comprehensive surveillance technology to ensure that Iran does not violate the treaty. The above problems plaguing the world today are urgent and practical, giving governments and corporations a reason to fund scientific research in these areas. As the adage goes, "necessity is the motherhood of invention".

Moreover, corporations seek profits. They have shareholders to answer to and their very existence is based on the ability to churn out sizable returns on investments. It is hard to imagine any private company that would be willing to fund scientific research if there was no economic value to be gained. Moderna and Pfizer, 2 of the biggest pharmaceutical companies, have invested billions of dollars into the research of a COVID-19 vaccine. It is wishful thinking to believe that such research is for the benefit of humanity as they plan to sell each dose of vaccine at a price range of US\$30-US\$50. With the entire world afflicted by this virus, the 2 companies expect a massive demand for their vaccines, which translates to enormous profits. It is difficult to convince companies to fund scientific research that does not produce money and companies are the ones with financial ability to fund such endeavours.

However, while such thinking might make practical sense, we should not be so narrow-minded and instead focus on the long-run benefits and implications of such scientific research.

Scientific research with no immediate practical value might become immensely important later on. The first appearance of the Internet in 1996 attracted many naysayers who failed to think about its future value. Many believed that such technology would only be useful for the elite few and most of society would have no practical use for it. Only a couple of technology visionaries like Bill Gates had the foresight to continue funding scientific research in the Internet. Fast-forward to today, where the ubiquity of the Internet serves as an indisputable testament to its value. It has engendered the democratisation of information and empowered many oppressed minority groups. Thus, we should not be so quick to dismiss any emerging technological advancement and conclude that they are worthless. No one can be definite about the impact of a novel scientific research and its innate value can only be discovered after sufficient funding has been poured into it.

In addition, scientific research serves to satisfy human's thirst for knowledge, and that itself is invaluable. From the Scientific Revolution in the 1600s up till now, humankind has always sought to advance and push our boundary of knowledge. New frontiers of discoveries emerge every day and yet we are not satisfied: the limitless potential of scientific research has kept us moving forward. Space research might seem like a huge waste of funding, as we have seemingly gained not even an iota worth of benefit from the moon landings in 1969. However, the space age has instilled in us a deeper purpose, to escape Earth's gravitational pull and explore the universe. The development of the Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland does not solve poverty or hunger, yet it allows scientists to uncover the subatomic world. Such knowledge is unquantifiable, and their true value may only be appreciated by a few, with many of us unaware of the progress.

However, they give a reason for humankind's pursuit of knowledge, and that itself is worth funding.

Furthermore, the funding of practical scientific research has led to more problems and conflicts, and we need a suitable regulatory regime to control their effects. The development of hypersonic missiles – capable of travelling at Mach 5 speeds – threaten to upset the international balance. Countries can no longer guarantee a sufficiently rapid response in the event of an aggressor's first strike. The weapons research has threatened the notion of mutual nuclear deterrence and invalidated the principle of Mutually Assured Destruction. Such developments only serve to increase the already stoked tensions existing between established nuclear powers, which might ignite a military firestorm. Also, the funding of social media has also led to the proliferation of hate speech and intolerant views. Scientific research in algorithms have made access to such content easier for radical users, such as how Pizzagate was influenced by far right threads on 4Chan. Uncontrolled funding in research has grave and terrifying consequences, and there needs to be suitable limits coupled with such development of technology to ensure that negative consequences are minimised while bringing out the full utility of scientific research.

We should fund scientific research as it might bring about long-term benefits and it is imperative for the pursuit of scientific truths. However, it is regrettable that governments and private entities focus on research that rakes in profits or those with short term practical value. With a limited budget, they will invest in the more immediate problems. For true progress to be made, there is a need for entrepreneurs to take the helm, like how Elon Musk set up SpaceX to research in commercial space flight. Lastly, governments and corporations need to be kept in check by a comprehensive regulatory system to ensure that their funding is for the greater good which does not compromise society.

Marker's comments:

A convincing and compelling argument on the whole. Your examples have provided appropriate insight in a generally well-organised essay, though I think your penultimate paragraph should have been placed after the second antithesis.

'In today's world, only scientific research with practical value is worth funding.' Discuss.

Today's world is one that is constantly changing and fraught with uncertainties and problems that require our immediate concern. While scientific research has often been perceived as a panacea to our problems from the development of Penicillin which reduced infection rates to the eradication of smallpox, the reality is that there are limits to the number of research projects we can fund or invest in. This calls for us to consider if only scientific research with practical value, addressing the malaise of today's world should be funded. I would contend that this is indeed the case, given the reality that today's world is plagued with societal issues and natural problems that require scientific research to solve and there is a limit to the number of scientific research projects we can fund. This is despite the fact that throughout history, scientific research is also meant to satisfy Mankind's innate curiosity and expand our knowledge, rather than addressing practical concerns.

Opponents of the view that only scientific research with practical value is worth funding today may argue that it is actually worthwhile to invest in research projects with little immediate practical benefits but that can broaden our understanding of the natural world and satisfy our thirst for knowledge. In today's world where the idea of humanism (i.e. the belief of each individual having the agency to transcend the limitations of current knowledge) prevails, there is also value in researching into the cosmos and universe and achieving a greater state of enlightenment. Although this does not translate to immediate tangible benefits or solutions to real-world problems in today's society, such research can allow individuals to better understand or appreciate their place in the universe and perhaps even reconcile our religious beliefs with science. For example, while theoretical physics has been criticised for being too abstract and not having any practical value in addressing issues like poverty and climate change today, many esteemed institutions like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology still invest millions of dollars in such scientific research for it enables us to explore the possibility of the existence of a higher dimension and a creator, nourishing the faith of those who are deeply spiritual. Hence, in viewing the goal of scientific research as more than simply to provide practical solutions to real-world problems, but also to achieve

greater enlightenment and affirm individual beliefs, it is perhaps worthwhile to fund scientific research that does not necessarily have any practical value.

However, it must be qualified that in today's capitalistic world, funding is limited and scientific research is a particularly expensive endeavour. The reality is that more funds must be channelled to scientific research that provides possible solutions to our immediate real-world problems of disease and pandemics so that we do not pursue scientific research with no practical value at the expense of the ones that does. In today's world, the source of funding can either be the state and corporations. In spite of the many available entities which can provide funding for scientific research, there are still many limitations to this. At times of economic recession or when government reserves are exhausted, the state is likely to invest more money into other needs like education or social welfare, instead of funding for scientific research. This is evident in how the United States government rerouted funds from research and development to state health and other sectors, resulting in the funding for scientific research being US\$10 billion dollars less than what it was before the 2008 economic recession. Even for corporations like Amazon, they are only willing to invest in scientific research that guarantees great monetary returns and do not often liberally channel funds into scientific research that ultimately does not generate profit. Hence, funding is limited in today's world. Moreover, the cost of scientific research is extremely high as well, with expensive laboratory equipment supplied by companies like Agilent being used and costly reagents needed for experiments. An example of the cost is how according to The Economist, US\$2.6 billion is needed to develop a drug. Therefore, realistically speaking, it is only worthwhile to fund scientific research with practical value given the limited funding, so that less money is wasted on other pursuits at the expense of developing solutions to our real-world problems.

The fact that today's world is fraught with many problems and uncertainties requiring our immediate concern necessitates us to focus on funding scientific research which has practical value and can help to address such problems. The looming threat of extreme weather events and changes in temperatures due to climate change in today's world is one that affects everyone, making it imperative to develop possible solutions that can serve to mitigate such a problem. The great worth of scientific research with practical value is thus heavily emphasized in this context, calling for a devotion of financial resources to it. For example, many companies like Impossible Food and Beyond Meats are developing and researching sources of protein that are texturally and nutritionally similar to real meats, to circumvent the problematic impacts of livestock rearing and feeding on our climate. Therefore, only scientific research with such practical value is worth funding in the context of today's world with real-world issues like climate change that need tackling.

Lastly, today's globalized world is also characterised by an unequal distribution of wealth and resources, resulting in poverty in less developed countries. This therefore calls for us to prioritise funding scientific research which can effectively respond to such pressing issues. It is incontrovertible that in today's context, it is only the potential of technology to address such potential issues that makes its development worthwhile to invest in. Most notably, many research institutions have devoted many resources to artificial intelligence for the purpose of tackling problems like poverty affecting our practical realities. Marshall Burke, a computer science professor from Stanford University, has developed an algorithm that predicts poverty distribution in Uganda based on satellite daytime and nighttime images to ensure that poor neighbourhoods can be identified and help can be provided to those households in a more targeted manner without any of them being left in the lurch. Similarly, Clemson University research scientists built a four-legged robot that can collect genetic, environmental, and growth data to predict the yield of the crops. Those examples illustrate the kinds of scientific research projects that are worth funding, against the backdrop of today's society. Hence, only scientific research with practical value in addressing real-world problems is worth devoting financial resources to.

In light of the immense promise of certain scientific research projects in tackling global issues and the pragmatic considerations of costs and limited funding, we should thus be more discriminating and consider only funding scientific research with practical value.

Marker's comments:

A thorough and balanced response that was consistently argued. Reasoning was generally clear and compelling, with relevant and concrete examples to substantiate your points. Writing was fluid and engaging. Keep it up.

2020 | Y6 | GP Prelim | Paper 2 | Passage

Louise Fabiani comments on our omnivorous appetites and the drawbacks of our gluttony.

Ten thousand desert rats, 10,000 fish, 14,000 sheep, 1,000 lambs, 1,000 fat oxen and many more creatures slaughtered, cooked and served: that is how Ashurnishabal of Mesopotamia (883-859 BCE) pampered almost 70,000 guests for 10 days. The Archbishop of York's enthronement feast in 1466 CE required 104 oxen, 2,000 geese, 1,000 capons, 1,000 sheep, 400 swans, 12 porpoises and seals, and a great number of other birds and mammals. Nothing pulls at the imagination like extremes – overwrought banquets and orgies, epic battles, devastating natural disasters, glorious human triumphs. Our omnivorous appetites find extravagant feasts awe-inspiring and enviable, and occasionally disconcerting.

During our hunter-gatherer past, which constitutes 99 per cent of our history as a species, those lavish and omnivorous tastes served us well. We routinely dined to capacity on a wide variety of nutritious fare to save us from malnutrition and starvation. Food quality and quantity were unpredictable, and contingent upon human forces such as trade routes, as well as the vagaries of weather and natural cycles. Very early on, we adapted to periodic scarcity, leaping at any chance to pile on calories and storable nutrients – for instance, when we found a bush laden with ripe berries, or a rockpool full of tide-stranded shellfish. Those who were quick-witted enough to see an opportunity when it presented itself and had the physiological means to convert extra calories into fat, were more likely to survive long stretches between meals, and to raise healthy offspring.

These adaptations had long been in place when humankind began its first huge revolution, the agricultural, which allowed food storage. As civilisations sprang up, the main beneficiaries of stuffed grain bins and successful herding – pharaohs, kings and other rulers – could stage banquets to repay political favours or use them as a sign of power over the have-not majority. The fantastic feast became part of folklore, for the elite. Alas, socioeconomic inequality was a fact of life in Europe, Asia and many other parts of the civilising world. Food became a signifier of class and a measure of rank when some people started to command more food resources than others.

Consequently, some of the first food-utopia stories emerged in medieval Europe, in a time of famine and epidemics. Dreaming of a paradise of easy eating became a popular escape for beleaguered peasants. A version of this ideal place was featured in the Land of Cockaigne. It first appeared in 1250 as a poem in France, replete with bountiful quantities of food, plenty of leisure time, and an implicit or explicit challenge to the class system. Cockaigne was a return to the Garden of Eden, a terrestrial version of Heaven, perfecting upon Nature, eliminating pain, discomfort and want of any kind. In that magical land, the human struggle within the food chain was finally over, and we were free – not only of being prey, but also of being fully predatory too. It also removed the backbreaking and miserable labour involved in farming for the benefit of overlords.

One constant seems clear: gluttony – shameful or proud – persists as exuberant overeating at social gatherings, eating contests and shopping sprees at price-club MegaMarts. But by any other name it is still a reminder of the polarised privilege inherent in our more precarious past. Herman Pleij, Emeritus Professor of medieval Dutch literature at the University of Amsterdam, contends that, if the people of medieval times could see us now, 'Modern-day Europe would represent in many respects the realisation of Cockaigne: fast food is available at all hours, as are climatic control, unemployment benefits, and plastic surgery that seemingly prolongs youth.' Without having to be all that historically savvy, today's marketers can exploit consumer lust based on human nature alone. In fact, it might be one of the easiest ways to get

consumers to part with their money: boggle their minds with food worthy of a feast, making it easy to acquire and consume.

The capacity for excess might explain the frequency with which humans have brought desirable wild animal populations to, and sometimes over, the brink of extinction. Two North American species stand out: the passenger pigeon, whose population nosedived from billions to zero by 1914 and the North Atlantic cod, whose size and numbers supported one of the richest international fisheries in history. In both cases, hunters faced with unimaginable bounty never had – or quickly lost – any notion of sustainable practice. It is easy to blame the people of other times and other circumstances for ecological short-sightedness, but imagine standing in a field in 19th century Pennsylvania and watching millions of passenger pigeons pass overhead, darkening the sky for days: would you stop and wonder if shooting wagonloads of them every week was a bad long-term plan?

However, as the relatively recent mismanagement of the northern cod stocks illustrates, there is no excuse for disregarding the needs of future generations because of short-term abundance right now. While an easy kill is desired, it still feels wrong. Like so many other human traits, the opposites here reside as a powerful pair in the collective consciousness. A certain squeamishness about death coexists with the understanding that any non-vegetarian meal costs a life, perhaps not entirely unlike our own in anatomy and emotional qualities. We grasp the cost, but gluttony – part of our biology – is still the rule. That biology is hardly unique, but even more problematic is the fact that culture acts upon it, creating a vast number of permutations that might be our fault alone.

Biology might give us the appetite and physiology for this dietary drive, but culture encodes and excuses it, and too often exaggerates it. Perversely, we place more value on a scarce commodity, partially because it is scarce. For instance, Bluefin tuna are in very high demand in the international sushi market, so they get hunted commercially. As they become rarer, they become more valuable. Breaking the circle would require top-down management of almost draconian levels, since mere regulation and slap-on-the-wrist fines would simply drive the market underground. Once again, products of the imagination – whether it is the hyperbole of a spectacular feast or the fantasy of a place where food is easily available and worry-free or the idea of a \$3-million tuna – erase animals' realities.

The all-you-can-eat buffet table and the ubiquitous fast food outlet are today's real life Cockaigne: easy, cheap, uncomplicated. The sheer quantity, not to mention the ease of access, does something to our relationship with the living or once-living food itself. Boggled by abundance, the mind can avoid dealing with unpleasant thoughts, primarily the pain and distress an animal experiences during pursuit, confinement and slaughter. It is almost too easy to erase the fact that our desire for satiety involves a living, feeling being, let alone one with a critical role in its ecosystem.

This is how we are: gluttonous, ravenous, lazy and short-sighted. To act any differently, the intellect must use complex arguments from philosophy and science to suppress millennia of adaptation. It's tough. Famine sticks in our cellular memory; the fat and protein in meat provide some of the best actual insurances against it, so biology cries Eat it! Culture adds that meat must not only be easy to find, but easy to acquire. Thus, the land of plenty is also the land of the lazy. And the lazy have the additional luxury of denying the uneasy truth behind their easy meals.

Fabiani argues that our omnivorous appetites and propensity for gluttony is due to both our history leading to our biological physiology and appetite, as well as our present culture of excess and convenience to food. I largely agree with her observations in the context of Singapore, in which convenience is frequently of utmost priority, and where a mostly omnivorous diet is deeply embedded in our culture and heritage, especially so due to our diverse, multi-cultural society.

In paragraph 9, referring to the examples of the “all-you-can-eat buffet table and the ubiquitous fast food outlet”, Fabiani posits that the “sheer quantity, not to mention the ease of access, does something to our relationship with the living or once-living food itself”, asserting that the abundance and convenience of non-vegetarian food options clouds our moral judgement when consuming such meals. I mostly agree with her opinion, as Singaporeans are well-known for being pragmatic and prioritising convenience. Singapore has been ranked in the top 5 most stressed countries worldwide, with Singaporean students spending the most time on homework per day in the world, illustrating how Singaporeans greatly value academic and career success, in line with our meritocratic society which posits that putting in more effort will translate to greater success. Therefore, it is not uncommon that Singaporeans would reach out for the most convenient food option instead of considering the ethical repercussions behind their meals. It is also certainly true that food is extremely convenient in Singapore, with many hawker centres situated below HDB blocks, a myriad of food options in any neighbourhood shopping mall, and convenient food delivery apps such as FoodPanda and GrabFood available as well. Furthermore, due to Singapore being a small, land-scarce country, we import most of our food from overseas producers, and most Singaporeans can easily purchase their groceries at the many grocery stores or markets around the island. This convenience and detachment from the source of the food could further cloud Singaporeans' moral judgement of their purchases, as buying frozen chicken wings from a supermarket definitely lacks the emotional impact of say, purchasing a chicken from a slaughterhouse.

I am inclined to believe that there is a deeper cause for our omnivorous appetites in Singapore, which is our extremely prevalent food culture. Singaporeans take pride in our food heritage, with the government even putting in a bid for our hawker culture to be considered in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In our diverse, multi-cultural society, dishes from different races and cultures merge together in a single hawker centre, with *rojak* being a prime

reflection of our society (many ingredients forming a single, cohesive dish), which is a keystone to the development of our national pride and identity. Although this can and should be seen as a benefit for the strengthening of our social fabric which could be easily threatened by inter-racial tensions, it may also lead to us excusing our omnivorous diets by attributing it to our culture and heritage, leading to us looking past the moral complications. Despite this seemingly contributing to our human propensity for gluttony, I believe that the benefits outweigh the costs in this situation. Hence Fabiani's observations are applicable to my society, but her argument that we should be more aware of what we are consuming may not resonate in Singapore.

Marker's comments:

Some very insightful evaluation, but second paragraph is marred by somewhat of a less direct relevance to the passage made (don't rely on the examiner to know which observations you are referring to). Good use of examples but, again, illustration lacking in second paragraph.

**‘Handicrafts no longer have any practical benefits in modern society.’
Comment.**

The age of machines has come, and with it, automation and the ability to mass produce goods and products for huge consumer markets at affordable prices. Handicrafts, then, are gradually becoming a thing of the past as craftsmen find it difficult to sell their expensive, hand-made goods. In a society where work done with the mind is priced over work done with the hands, the benefits of handicrafts may be difficult to immediately discern. Yet, I believe that they possess many practical in an age of globalisation, economic crises and chronic environmental issues. Not only can the handicraft industry revitalise regional economies, it can do so in a sustainable and environmentally-friendly manner. Furthermore, traditional handicrafts preserve traditional sensibilities in an age of increasing cultural homogenisation – and they can do so in a modern way. Finally, handicrafts can be the key that unlocks the door of inner peace and emotional stability in the fast-paced and stressful modern world, giving it great practical value.

Despite their benefits, it is true that the modern man may have difficulty justifying the practicality of handicrafts. After all, such products, by virtue of being hand-made with traditional techniques, do not lend themselves to mass production, which could mean that each item would come to cost more than normal, mass-produced ones. Given that such handicrafts fail to compete with mass-produced goods, they thus possess very little economic value. Indeed, handicrafts such as Okinawa’s glass bead-making and Europe’s hand-painted ceramic tiles have seen a vast decline in audience, and it has been difficult for businesses to keep afloat. In Japan alone, the handicraft industry has seen a drop in revenue by almost 70% from 1970 to 2015. With such bleak economic prospects, do handicrafts really have any benefit that can justify their existence in the 21st century?

However, it is my belief that handicrafts, despite failing to be economically viable from a traditional standpoint, possess a huge potential to revitalise struggling regional economies in a sustainable manner, making them extremely valuable to modern societies. While the current business models used in the handicraft industry are struggling, many regions have begun to incorporate such businesses into their plans for

cultural tourism, capitalising on the handicraft industry to attract tourism that will in turn give their economies a much-needed boost. The added benefit is that this can be done without excessive harm to our environment as handicrafts are hand-made in small quantities, eliminating the usual environmental problems or pollution arising from high carbon dioxide emissions that come from large factories producing goods on an unimaginable scale. One such example is Japan's Arimatsu region in Nagoya. The city council created a cultural street where traditional handicraft shops operated in traditional buildings, attracting as many as 25% more tourists and successfully getting it back on its feet. Handicrafts thus can indeed possess the power to reap economic benefits, if marketed in the right way, and hence does have pragmatic value. Furthermore, the Arimatsu Shibori that they promoted is a form of tie-dyeing by hand, which produces apparel and fabric items in a more environmentally-friendly manner compared to if such items were produced in factories. Initiatives to recycle old clothes and giving them a new lease of life were also carried out, reducing material waste in the area. In a world plagued by global warming, every small part to keep fossil fuel emissions down counts. Not only can handicrafts help to improve the economy, the industry has consciously paved the way to a more sustainable economic future by providing a tried-and-tested model of an economic plan that can balance both profit and sustainability. This, I believe, is in itself a tremendous achievement if we consider the fact that the reconciliation between economic gain and environmental sustainability is a problem our societies have been grappling with since the rise of industrialisation.

Of course handicrafts are also inextricably linked to the culture and heritage of a region, making them paramount to the preservation of a country's identity and historical roots in an increasingly homogenous world. Despite being commonly seen to be obsolete due to the traditional methods used to craft them, handicrafts are also able to preserve our culture and heritage in a modern manner, which actually elevates its importance to the current world. This is because craftsmen and companies are far from blind- they too are cognizant of the current trends where handicrafts seem to be losing their foothold in the public consciousness. After all, will a modern consumer choose to buy a dress made out of Batik cloth, from an internationally acclaimed brand such as Kate Spade? What good is history and tradition if it has no more meaning in the face of our fixation on the cosmopolitan lifestyle that has seen international brands explode in popularity? While all the cards seem to be stacked against handicrafts, they have miraculously managed to solve the problem. For example, the Nishijin-ori is a traditional hand-embroidery method that, in the past, was a fixture of kimonos and traditional Japanese costumes. Yet, fewer and fewer people nowadays don such traditional garb, preferring instead to sport popular brands such as Nike or Adidas, which is a trend around the world. Humanity is indeed becoming homogenised by the effects of globalisation, and handicrafts are suffering for it- or so we think. However,

HOSOO, one of the companies that has safeguarded over 300 years of Japanese history and culture by producing Nishijin-ori, has recently collaborated with Peter Marino, an internationally-acclaimed architect, to produce fabrics made from the handicrafts for luxury furniture and wallpaper. What followed was a change in the way Nishijin-ori was made to accommodate the new products. This proves that handicrafts are able to preserve traditional sensibilities in a modern way. Furthermore, the company is currently experimenting with artificial intelligence to create the handicraft, in collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, showing how handicrafts can find applications in technology, which is undoubtedly a contribution to our modern world. In fact, handicrafts such as Nishijin-ori that constantly reinvent themselves as the times progress is proof that they have a great, practical value to modern society because they are able to preserve culture in a way that encourages modernity, challenging conventional notions of cultural preservation and leading the way for the future use of technology in traditional crafts. This marriage of antiquity and modernity, and this intermingling of traditional sensibilities with a new twist is exactly what our society needs to do in order to preserve our diverse cultures, which is becoming a Herculean task due to the homogenising effects of globalisation.

Without neglecting the individual, handicrafts also have great value for pragmatic societies as they can help to allocate stress and provide emotional comfort that contracts the chronic stress and mental illnesses faced by any in society. In particular, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that has become the largest disruption to modern living since the introduction of the smartphone, has shown to have affected the mental well-being of those in lockdown. In a survey conducted in Britain, it was found that almost 30% of residents struggled with mental illnesses such as depression – an astounding number that is bound to cause ripples across societies in ways we cannot begin to imagine. On the other hand, many also found that their lives brightened up when they took up new hobbies such as handicrafts, which have been made accessible to many through online orders. The role of handicrafts hence becomes clear: they provide solace to individuals; society runs on individuals, hence the mental well-being of individuals brought about by handicrafts cannot be ignored on a societal scale. In fact, especially because life has become increasingly automated and interactions are characterised by isolation, the practical value of creating items with a solid pair of hands that is your own has increased. In Mexico, many women have formed social groups to participate in braiding strings of thread into beautiful handicrafts. Handicrafts clearly have the power to draw isolated individuals in a society closer together, helping the lonely to find solace in company. In Singapore, a common activity to help elderly bond with their friends is creating handicrafts. Handicraft workshops on making paper flowers and knitting stuffed toys are regularly conducted at community centres to produce an opportunity for lonely elderly to find company, given that a vast majority

of Singapore's metropolitan population are busy with work and find it difficult to make enough time to accompany the elderly. The emotional comfort that creating handicrafts brings, and finding communities of like-minded individuals through handicrafts, is extremely beneficial as it can ameliorate burgeoning social issues such as mental illness and loneliness, as well as lead to the creation of communities for individuals that would otherwise find themselves outcasts in a rapidly developing world. While it is true that there are many other hobbies or activities that can lead to the same result, none are as practical as handicrafts, as the latter require only a pair of hands and materials which can be easily substituted, making them a prime candidate to fight the isolation and stresses of modern living.

It is unfortunate that contemporary society would choose to see handicrafts in a way that suggests its antiquated nature when it is in fact far from obsolete. As a practical tool that can revitalise economies, the strategies that involve the handicraft industry can be economically viable and extremely beneficial to struggling regions. In addition, handicrafts are constantly reinventing themselves to stay not only relevant but cement their function as a tool to preserve important parts of our culture in modern ways that will resound with a contemporary consumer, making them infinitely useful to society. Lastly, handicrafts play a role in creating a more resilient society and giving increasingly isolated individuals a space to interact, transforming modern society into something more than a heartless agglomeration of progress and productivity. Handicrafts have existed for centuries – and for good reason. It is my belief that they will continue to do so due to the practical benefits they bring to all modern societies.

Marker's comments:

Karen, you could do a bit more to address "no longer" at the start of the essay, but overall it was a pleasant read. The ideas were very logically and eloquently developed. You gave very compelling and convincing analyses too. Keep it up!

**'It is harder than ever for voters
to make the right choices in elections today.' Discuss.**

Winston Churchill once stated that the best argument against democracy would be to have a five minute conversation with your average voter. The way democracy is carried out today is flawed in many ways, and by no means an unassailable panacea for achieving any country's goals. Ranging from representative democracies giving voters an illusion of political participation to the phenomenon of the "ignorant voter", its shortcomings are there for all to see and converse about. The latter, especially, is becoming increasingly relevant today, with the emergence of fake news and political manipulation, obscuring and tainting the once revered electoral process. Despite the unprecedented development of technology in this day and age, I argue that, in this present moment, it is harder than ever for voters to make the right decision.

Prima facie, technological innovation seems to be a means for us to bypass the barriers of imperfect information, and hence help voters to make informed decisions and choices on who gets their vote. This can be observed in the 'mascot' of technology, the Internet. Search engines provide access to an unlimited, seemingly infinite vault of data and information about a myriad of topics, spanning from current events to political ideals of their potential representatives. Not only that, but technology is widespread and ubiquitous today, having integrated itself into our lives. This quality of technology, its accessibility, helps to provide a source of illumination for the topics one is unfamiliar with. Also, it provides not only factual statements on the matters in question but acts as a platform for exposure to political debate for opinions to be discussed. An example: Online forums like Reddit or Quora act as avenues for people to voice out their political opinions with uncensored freedom, away from the political influence of the government. In this sense, these discussions are for the people, by the people. Additionally, when experts or specialists take part in these discussion, helping to educate and inform the uninitiated, it definitely is a huge tool for correcting the obliviousness of the voters. In the long run, this has a butterfly effect, where more people will engage others in political discussion and hence fuel the resolution of this flaw of democracy.

Yet, whilst technology is seen as a nascent tool in our kit against this issue, its impacts are by no means all positive. With all the benefits that its outreach and convenience bring, it also catalyses the spread of fake information and, conversely, hinders the enlightenment it is supposed to achieve. A key example of this would be the presence of deepfakes, the use of technology to superimpose a prominent figure's image onto a model speaking baseless claims and lies. On social media platforms, where these videos are spread incessantly, it will delude a portion of the community in propagating and believing these lies. Yes, the presence of censorship and fact-checking through cross-verification by users can mitigate this issue, but it does not completely eradicate the lasting and seismic impacts it has on the people. Users who utilise social media mainly view it a convenient bastion for information, which misleads people into mindlessly accept whatever is being construed to them. The deepfakes mentioned earlier are exceptional in quality, done in a way where only the most keenly observant user can discern the difference between a deepfake and the real thing. The fact that social media users are not aware of its presence and not actively guarding themselves against this threat will exacerbate the propagation of fake news, which makes matters even worse. A real life example is QAnon, a baseless claim that President Trump is secretly combatting top Democrats running a child trafficking ring, which quickly gained traction in the US. Although it sounds so ludicrous, many of the US' citizens have fallen prey to it, such being the danger of fake news. Therefore, technology in actuality is a huge threat to people's ability to make informed decisions, from a political standpoint.

Secondly, today, in a democratic setting, more and more prominent politicians are manipulating the voters en masse, such that they are inclined to vote for these politicians regardless whether or not it is the right decision. First of all, it is critical to accept the difference between what people believe to be right and the normative, impartial correct cause of action to take. The former is relativistic in nature, where one acts based on individual opinion, while the other strives to be an objective stance on the matter. In this sense, today's politics climate skews the voters' inkling on what is the right choice. This is mainly seen in populist nations, where politicians take advantage of the dissatisfaction of the ordinary folk against the elites for their own political gain. An example is Hungary, where Viktor Orban, a right-wing populist, was elected. His actions since then have underlined that his election was the wrong choice. He now stands at the pinnacle of power in Hungary, where he is slowly dismantling the democratic institution, restricting press liberty, undermining the education system, and reducing the power of the judiciary. He is seen as a proponent of "illiberal democracy", which is simply a euphemism for dictatorship, and is slowly transforming Hungary into an authoritarian regime. The fact that he is able to achieve election by deceiving the masses shows the difficulty in making the right choice today. In the past, the candidates in the election would be solely fixated on the growth and development

of the country as a whole; today, many of the politicians are opportunistic in nature and exploit the trust bestowed to them by the people for personal gain. In this sense, voters now have the added task of seeing through these lies, which is undeniably difficult with the false promises offered to enhance their livelihoods, especially the disenfranchised. To them, government support is vital, which makes them in turn ever so susceptible to the falsehoods these politicians provide.

Finally, even the definition of the normative, right choice is coming increasingly under fire today, propelled by the conflicting interests of different groups in society. It can often be a zero-sum game, where giving yourself something inadvertently takes something away from someone else. To win, others must lose. In this context, the conflict of whether to prioritise the individual or the community as a whole arises. This conflict is exponentially intensified by globalisation and the interdependence of different groups on one another. In the US, a key conflict of interests is between the right-wing conservatives and the left-wing liberals. With the Mexican immigrant crisis a key talking point in recent years, each party undeniably has different takes and methods to address the problem. The public intellectual has to weigh the impacts to both himself and the wider community in his internal dilemma. In this context, the Republican method is, evidently, to prevent these immigrants from seeking asylum here, whilst the Democrats may be more willing to accept and attempt to integrate them into US society. The obvious implications to the individual would be the loss of jobs and falling wages for locals, yet to deny immigrants access would be tantamount to compromising the needs of the victimised. So, the conflicting interests of morality and self-preservation render this decision ever so difficult to make. Of course, where the significance of political choices are concerned, we are merely scratching the surface here. It is simply impractical for voters to consider all these issues in order to make their vote when, in essence, someone has to be sacrificed, and often times the right decision is not the morally correct one. As such, especially today, the definition of the right decision is being obscured and blurred ever so greatly, with the emergence of many more issues which require concrete action indirectly compromising groups that rely heavily on support from the government to get by.

In conclusion, voters have a monumental task ahead of them today, if they aspire to make the right choice. Yet with many hyper-materialistic societies being overly fixated on material gains and making decisions that prioritise the individual country over all else, one has to wonder whether the world has to be a zero-sum game. Today, the economic pie is finite, yet by making the decisions that seem at first glance to be detrimental to the society or the individual in question, choosing to aid others may transform our world to be a positive-sum one. Only then, can we all get a bigger portion of the pie. Perhaps politicians and voters alike can recognise this fact and take

concrete steps into transforming the world for the better, and maybe this would increase transparency and make the electoral decision one that is not so murky.

Marker's comments

Essay shows a good understanding and a confident display of knowledge pertaining to this topic. Examples are sound and well-detailed to support the points made. Analysis and evaluation of the issue/world today is seen but can afford to be more consistent throughout. Smooth and sophisticated choice of words. Expression is fluent and engaging. But do be careful of lapsing into run-on expressions.

**'It is harder than ever for voters
to make the right choices in elections today.' Discuss.**

The informational and political landscape of today is radically different from that of several years ago, and profoundly more complex. The growing democratic recession across the world perhaps best attests to this. Democracy, and its most quintessential element – voting – has produced leaders and political administrations that infringe on civil liberties, and often by extension the rational interests of voters themselves. In short, voters are increasingly voting against themselves. The altered or distorted social, emotional and informational environment of today has clearly made it harder than ever for voters to make the right, rational choices in elections.

Some detractors may insist that the spectacular rise of social media has in fact democratised access to information on an unprecedented scale, enabling voters to make informed and sensible decisions at the ballot box. Social media has connected individuals to not merely the opinions and stories of friends and fellow citizens, but also to credible views and sources of information that they might otherwise not have enjoyed access to. One can easily receive regular updates on local developments and happenings through following media outlets and news agencies on social media. In fact, social media has facilitated access to sources of information that might otherwise not have been readily available. Dissident news outlets and contrarian voices that may have been strenuously suppressed or silenced on traditional news mediums, which tend to be subject to tighter state control, have found a voice and platform on social media. The proliferation of such alternative perspectives or otherwise stifled stories of political abuses and excesses has offered voters a more holistic, authentic picture of political leaders. Social media effectively enabled the story of the egregious IMDB scandal in Malaysia to gain popular traction and capture public attention. Details of colossal losses at the state investment fund and dubious transfers to the personal bank accounts of key ruling politicians were vigorously suppressed, or plainly ignored altogether, by mainstream media outlets. It was through social media that dissident journalists, such as Clare Rewcastle Brown, were able to expose the magnitude of prevailing political corruption, and the blatant pilfering of public monies by incumbent political figures. These explosive revelations circulated rapidly on social media, and the venal ruling party was eventually turned out of power at the 2015 Malaysian General

Elections, for the first time since independence. Evidently, with the presence of social media in society, contrarian or alternative voices have found a following, equipping voters with information that encourage the right choices at elections.

However, the rise of social media may in fact be far from benign, and scarcely as joyously emancipatory as supposed by some. In fact, the wealth of information that social media has offered may have induced a poverty of attention, rendering voters susceptible to corrosive manipulation and almost surgical social engineering like never before, constituting a grave challenge to right decision-making at the ballot box. Social media, while often touted as a liberating force, has proven to be incredibly malleable, vulnerable to capture and control by malignant moneyed and political interests. This can effectively deprive voters of the capacity or the ability to make the right choices in a suffocating digital environment in which they are smothered by the miasma of misinformation. Russian interference in the 2016 US elections is a notable case in point: Russian-sanctioned hackers and malefactors such as the Internet Research Agency produced and propagated falsehoods that favoured Republican candidate Donald Trump. Such falsehoods were circulated primarily on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, and included ludicrous assertions such as a claim that Donald Trump had received the endorsement of Pope Francis, a blatant fabrication that enjoyed over a million shares on social media platforms. The impact of such falsehoods was compounded and amplified by the intrinsic character of social media. While such spurious allegations would not even have been carried by traditional media outlets, the virality that such misinformation quickly found on social media was legitimising, further conferring an illusion of objectivity. Thus, social media has proven to be fertile ground for coordinated, malicious disinformation campaigns which have proven to critically impair voters' ability to make the right choices in elections. A case in point: the racist and xenophobic Donald Trump eventually trounced establishment favourite Hillary Clinton, in an election in which analysts claim the influence of social media misinformation was decisive.

Apart from the insidious cognitive sabotage in this warped informational landscape, societies today are witnessing an emergence of identity politics that has deprived individuals of the agency to make the right choices in the very first place. Increasingly, immutable identities such as race, class and gender are becoming the basis of political contestation, hijacking political discourse as the debate over outcomes has been displaced by a struggle for recognition. This has radically reduced the prevailing political options in society today, as politicians pander to specific demographics or those of exclusive ideological inclinations. Politics has grown hyperpolarised as moderate political options have evaporated, forcing voters to accept extreme political platforms. Furthermore, where moderate political options do exist, voters are under immense

pressure to reject and repudiate these, as politics on the basis of identity makes compromise challenging, with such a choice often framed as a social and moral treachery. This is perhaps epitomised in America, where identity politics has effectively bifurcated American society – educated Americans and minorities tend to plump for the Democratic Party, while the White majority and working classes constitute the Republican Party's support base. This conception of politics around identity has made necessary political compromise virtually impractical, as any attempt at negotiation, concession to or conciliation with political rivals is framed as a fundamental betrayal of one's kin. This has severely limited and circumscribed the choices of voters, as moderate candidates are outflanked by extreme ones, and voters are deprived of moderate choices that they may prefer, which may well be far more ideal options for society. Clearly, the proliferation of identity politics has critically impinged on the ability of voters to make the right choices as they are pigeonholed into false and illusory binary extremes.

Lastly, with the rise of identity politics in modern society, there has also been an attendant emergence of emotional populism, which has eclipsed rational voting and made it more difficult for voters to make the right choices. In a phenomenon that integrates both the effects of social media as well as that of ascendant identity politics, the politics of today has proven to be increasingly visceral and unfiltered, affecting rational decision-making. When political discourse was the sole province of the elites, politics was characterised by a dispassionate, clinical and even ruthless assessment of national interest, such as what was dubbed the "stiff upper lip" in the case of British politics. Political cynicism that emerged as democratic dysfunction or failure became evident has unfortunately ushered in an era of emotional populism. As a burgeoning underclass in society felt that their anxieties and grievances were not conferred legitimacy and recognition by the political elite, emotional populism became a comforting palliative that many flocked to – characterised most saliently by the pandering to immediate, visceral political sentiments that may in reality lack rational sense – that could hardly be considered right choices. In the UK, forces of globalisation and migration that disenfranchised many white working-class British citizens created raw social and economic grievances. However, progressive policies pursued by a political core in London often failed to recognise or validate such concerns. This in turn precipitated a shock decision in the 2016 Brexit referendum for the UK to withdraw from the European Union. After decades of consistently being "right", where such emotions and concerns were vigorously invalidated and delegitimised, voters made an ostensibly "wrong" decision. Such emotional populism has infiltrated the political consciousness in many societies across the world and displaced rational political choice. With the irrevocable transformation of political discourse in this ultra-

emotional environment where it may be hard to get detachment, right choices for voters have become more challenging than ever.

In conclusion, voters are grappling with a hostile reality in which they are increasingly boxed in and manipulated, with the social environment around perverted. It is critical, therefore, for societies to inoculate themselves from such destructive forces which besiege democracy and which make free, right choices impossible.

Marker's comments:

There was a conscious attempt to link your points of view to the concept of 'right choices'. Some very good insights on the political landscape of current times but would have been even better if the response focused on difficulties faced by voters and not on broader societal issues. Where language is concerned, there were many instances of felicitous expressions. Your points were conveyed effectively, making the essay an interesting read.

**‘International organisations are ineffective at resolving conflict.’
To what extent do you agree?**

“The condition of man is the condition of war of everyone against everyone.” This quote from English philosopher Thomas Hobbes reveals the fragile state of peace that exists in many countries today. While much of the world is not at war, there is always the potential for deadly conflict to break out at any moment. In the modern world, characterised by scholars as increasingly “volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous”, mankind has devised international organisations as a means of brokering international cooperation and resolving disputes. Despite past successes at peacekeeping and conflict resolution, international organisations are ineffective in resolving conflict in the long term to a large extent. They are unable to resolve the root cause of many conflicts, are crippled by internal disunity, and are hence unable to take a unified stance on disputes. Also, many of them are powerless in the face of belligerent actors.

Optimists may postulate that international organisations are effective at resolving conflict given the extensive reach of organisations and their ability to facilitate compromise. They point to past successes of bodies such as the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. For instance, territorial disputes over Cyprus have been effectively deemed “dead” after NATO convinced Turkey and Greece to put aside their differences and cease sniping at one another. Given how these global bodies often involve a large group of countries – 193 states are currently official members of the UN – they are uniquely poised to act as mediators and facilitators, wielding immense power to prevent the eruption of conflict by compelling states to work together.

Despite this immense reach of international organisations, they are only effective in resolving conflict in the short term, rather than brokering long-term peace. There are certainly countries that have enjoyed long stretches of harmony after the intervention of global bodies, but there are far more that have seen the continued onslaught of war and conflict. A case in point would be the failure of UN peacekeepers to resolve ongoing wars in Libya, Yemen and Syria – despite sending out troops on the ground, as well as calling out rulers such as Bashar al-Assad for crimes against humanity, they have been unable to secure longstanding peace. The UN has succeeded in facilitating

communication between belligerents such as the Kurdish and Yemeni government, for example, with the subsequent creation of no-fly zones and ceasefires as evidence of temporary peace, but only to have them break down again. The violation of past agreements by belligerents is what international institutions are unable to prevent – while facilitating compromise and tempering rising tensions help to cool conflicts, international organisations remain fundamentally limited in their powers and ultimately cannot ensure compliance when states maintain their right to sovereignty and take actions to protect their interests. Should state actors wish to resume conflict, no one can prevent them, particularly global bodies that simply aim to halt violence in the short term.

The power of international organisations remains painfully insignificant in the face of individual states' hard power and belligerence, where countries are often unrestrained by the actions of international organisations. International bodies are in themselves a paradox: while meant to check the actions of rogue states that step out of line, their ability to do so is accorded to them by these very nation states. Despite the existence of institutions such as the United Nations Security Council and the International Court of Justice, which can issue legally binding mandates, international organisations are only as powerful as their member states allow them to be so. While smaller countries such as Singapore or New Zealand may respect the rulings of these institutions by their dependence on the rule of law for survival, bigger and more powerful ones such as China and the United States are free to flout the rules, given their immense geopolitical clout. A prime example would be China's disregard of the International Court of Justice ruling that the 'nine-dash line' was invalid; despite having its territorial claims to large swathes of the South China Sea rebuffed, China continues to carry out antagonistic naval drills in the ports of the sea that it claims today. It is countries like China remaining undeterred by international condemnation and potential legal repercussions that make today's system of international bodies fundamentally toothless. States often invoke the notion of 'sovereignty' to justify engaging in war with other countries; the recognition of individual states' freedom to act means that international bodies simply cannot do much to constrain nations from engaging in conflict with one another. Facing unrelenting stubbornness and hard power such as military force, international organisations remain ineffective at resolving conflict.

Moreover, it is the very multilateral nature of international institutions that results in internal deadlock, where global bodies cannot take a unified stance on conflicts, effectively rendering themselves unable to step in and resolve disputes. Premised upon international cooperation and compromise, these institutions heavily emphasise the importance of reaching a consensus, as evidenced by the plethora of international organisations which require consensus on any resolution before it is passed — from

the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to certain specialised bodies in the UN, disagreement is viewed as constructive and must be resolved. However, the existence of competing blocs and diversity in nation-states within these organisations means it is very difficult for any organisation to take a decisive stand on any conflict. For instance, the UN Security Council has attempted to vote time and time again on resolutions that name and shame proponents of war or atrocities such as the Syrian government and the Burmese military, to force them to the negotiating table and stop the fighting. Alas, the conflicting stances of member states on these issues mean that effective or timely resolutions are, more often than not, vetoed and rendered null. In theory, the representation of highly diverse states from different parts of the world may enable international institutions to intimidate belligerents in conflict and rally other countries together to stop them. Unfortunately, the reality is that those with competing interests view taking sides as a matter of national interest, where many powers take opposing sides in a conflict. One need not look further than the Nagorno-Karabakh region spanning Armenia and Azerbaijan, where autocrat allies Turkey and Russia support and sponsor conflicting Azerbaijan and Armenia respectively. This gridlock seen within global organisations in settling disputes is set to worsen given the emergence of an increasingly multipolar world. The departing American Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, alarmed by the rise of China, urged countries to “take sides” as great powers increasingly demand loyalty, discarding unity for polarisation. It is this increasing polarisation and conflict that must inform us that international organisations cannot be an effective remedy for conflict.

Finally, lacking in the detailed understanding of each country’s local context, global organisations may offer only symptomatic relief rather than addressing the root causes of conflict. The nature of international organisations means that they are obliged to keep an eye on every single territory in the world, resulting in their powers and resources being stretched too thin. Hence, it proves almost impossible for them to address the unique cultural context that may result in conflict in every country. This is exacerbated by how most causes of conflict are a result of heavily-localised disagreements specific to each country – for example, much of the ongoing violence in the Middle East is a by-product of the ongoing proxy battle between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi’a Iran in a battle for sectarian dominance. Conflict is heavily rooted in historical reasons, where the opposing nature of two ideologies or longstanding animosity may provoke disagreement and subsequent war between two actors at any point in time. A prime case study would be the countries of Eritrea and Ethiopia, where, after extensive assistance from the UN and the African Union, they came to peace in 2018, with the Ethiopian Prime Minister even being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. However, what these organisations failed to recognise was that the animosity between the Tigrayan minority in Ethiopia and the majority – a major cause of conflict –

remained unresolved, leading to the breakout of civil war within Ethiopia itself. While conflicts may end temporarily, the root causes of violence and war may remain a perennial thorn in the sides of international bodies, only manifesting themselves later in a different conflict or form. These root causes, often fuelled by propaganda or nationalist rhetoric firmly embedded in the psyches of a country's citizens, cannot be easily dealt with by mere facilitation or compromise. Given how international bodies focus on ending existing violence, they may fail to address the more implicit, less obvious reasons for the outbreak of conflict in the very first place.

Thomas Hobbes' opinion on the state of mankind may seem rather pessimistic, but conflict is certainly inevitable in today's world where different actors have fundamentally opposing interests and have arguably unchecked power. Hence, the unfortunate reality that we have to face is that of conflict and violence – difficult for international organisations to reduce in the long run. Although they may potentially facilitate the brokering of compromise in the short term, this power is extremely limited.

Marker's comments:

Thoughtful response as to how international organisations are ineffective in resolving conflicts. Very thoroughly argued and analysed, with a lovely variety of examples used. Some parts of the essay could have been better explained to show a more explicit link to the role/power, albeit limited, of IOs. Nonetheless, a very competent piece of writing! Sophisticated, mature and smooth language seen. Tone is appropriate and introduction is well-conceptualised. Paragraphs can be more evenly developed, especially for your counterargument.

**‘Pop music has no value beyond being a source of entertainment.’
What is your view?**

Gone are the days when music was widely considered an art form that deserved respect and appreciation. While musicians of the past were concerned with the cadences, rhythm and tempos of their work, today’s musicians are more concerned with their work’s entertainment value and whether their work would make it to the top of global charts. Thus, is there any value in popular music apart from its role as a source of entertainment? Although pop music is a far cry from the elegant and meritorious classical works of the past and is increasingly commercialised and trivialised, pop music has also provided us with more value than that. It has spread awareness about highly pertinent social issues, brought about political and economic benefits to individuals or even entire nations, and embodied the deeply personal stories of musicians for sharing with the world. Hence, pop music is much more than just a source of sheer entertainment.

“Pop” music, in its literal sense, already shows its lack of taste and its mere appeal to the masses. Being a “popular” genre of music that can easily be appreciated and enjoyed by the general audience, pop music is kitschy, commercialised and just a daft, shallow genre of music – at first glance. It cannot be denied that pop music is entertaining: attractive pop stars, grooving to the booming bass of their tracks, or conventionally-beautiful singers, producing tunes that capture the heart of listeners, reach the masses and allow them to enjoy the music and atmosphere. Yet, some claim that pop music has no other merit than its entertainment value. Take Billie Eilish for example. This young teenager already has numerous hits to her name, such as “Bad Guy”, in which her monotonous whispery melody stood out. It was indubitably a hit among her young fan base, with its cool beat and “vibes”, but when compared to classical music concepts, such as melody or the need for singers to project their voices, her songs lose their value. As pop music is usually seen as just another case of commercialisation of the arts, it is thought that pop music must only be entertaining, and nothing more, to earn the consumers’ affection. Hence, on the surface, it can be said that pop music has little to offer apart from its entertainment value.

However, pop music has also managed to bring about very real benefits, such as by spreading awareness about pertinent social issues. Pop music leverages on its popularity to reach the masses and bring across messages to as many people as possible. In fact, if pop music were not entertaining, it would not be able to spark conversations about their subject matter which could include social problems that need to be sorted out. Pop music can be used to disseminate information: the Singapore Civil Defence Force commissioned local singer-songwriter Annette Lee to produce an entertaining piece of music to persuade the people of Singapore to call emergency hotlines only when necessary or to call the non-emergency hotline instead. Entitled “The Non-Emergency Rap!”, this piece of pop music stayed true to the current popularity of rap among music lovers, while also conveying messages of importance. With its catchy lyrics and rhythm (“call one-triple seven not nine-nine-five!”), the song shows that pop music is the perfect medium to relay such information and ensure information can be retained. Apart from logistical messages, pop music can also spread awareness and spark discourse about contentious issues. Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way” was such a song, affirming the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community with lyrics that explicitly state that there is nothing wrong being LGBT as they were, literally, “born this way”. Michael Jackson’s “Black or White” was another instance, encouraging the world to look beyond race and to halt racial discrimination, since “it don’t matter if you’re black or white!”. Using their popularity as pop icons, Lady Gaga, Michael Jackson and many other artistes have used their pop music to spark conversations about social injustices among the masses, since pop music has the power to do more than just entertain.

In addition, pop music also has deeper value than sheer entertainment – it can also be a powerful tool to embody the personal stories and emotions of the artistes themselves. These narratives are then shared with the listeners of their pop music, inspiring their lives or even educating them. Apart from the earlier point about pop music’s value in sparking thought in listeners’ minds, pop music also has the power to speak to people’s hearts and move them. “Rockabye” by Clean Bandit is such a song. This song speaks about the struggles and triumphs of single mothers in raising their children, bringing in personal stories of the songwriter herself and her experience of raising her son. By raising awareness of the plight of single mothers, the song can help listeners grow compassionate and learn about their lives that are often relatively unknown, through the accessible medium that is pop music. Another example is “Papaoutai” by French singer-songwriter Stromae, which encapsulates the pining and yearning of a young boy for his father. In fact, Papaoutai is phonetically the same pronunciation as French for “Papa, where are you”, which makes Stromae’s personal story of his father having been a victim of genocide even more stark. It also moves the heart even further when listeners begin to question the history of the genocide and

feel for the protagonist, the young boy. Evidently, pop music is also an invaluable medium that can employ pathos to touch the heart of listeners, although admittedly this impact may be limited by the language of the songs' lyrics. In this case, pop music may also touch the hearts of those who may not understand the lyrics, with the visual help of music videos which often (if not always) accompany main tracks. Hence, pop music has value in that it can also touch the hearts of its listeners in profound ways, allowing us to exercise valuable compassion and humanity.

Similarly, pop music also has the ability to generate political and economic benefits for individuals and even for entire nations. Pop music can be easily marketed due to its entertainment value, and this marketability does not see geographical boundaries. In this digital age, the latest entertaining phenomena immediately goes viral in the virtual space, with pop music acts being no exception. Pop music thrives on its vibrancy, novelty, and, well, its popularity. When combined with the effects of globalisation and digitalisation, it has the power to generate interest with its country of origin and culture, which ultimately gives their country soft power and economic benefits due to increased derived demand for its goods. Look no further than BTS, the South Korean boy band that is becoming nothing less than a household name. Being the first all-South Korean band to reach the top spot of the Billboard charts, BTS skyrocketed to fame, and started widening their fan base to include fans from all over the world. However, there were wider-reaching impacts – not only did BTS gain popularity, other Korean-pop groups, idols, and in fact the entire South Korean culture became of interest globally. Around the world, the demand for South Korean goods rose, where consumers wanted to see and experience a glimpse of South Korean culture. This elevated South Korea's economy and position on the world stage, providing immense political and economic benefits to the nation, in terms of soft power. The South Korean government has even acknowledged this by awarding the group with prestigious cultural and national awards, honouring their contributions to the country. While it is true that perhaps BTS rose to fame not because of solely their pop music (but also because of their dance, good looks and marketing), this case study of BTS goes to show that pop music has the power to generate political and economic advantages when it goes viral. As pop music grows in popularity and accessibility, it is no longer just entertaining, as it also reaps tangible, tremendous rewards, not only for the pop artistes, but also their sphere of influence.

In conclusion, pop music can be easily seen as a shallow source of entertainment with no meaningful value. Yet, it is also owing to its popularity and the fact that it is mainstream that pop music has the ability to do so much more – spreading awareness, touching listeners' hearts and reaping tangible rewards. Even if pop music cannot be compared to the masterful symphonies and concertos of past maestros, perhaps it is

prudent to not conflate nor compare the value of different genres of music. Pop music is a modern phenomenon that appeals to modern society, and has the capacity to be more than just entertainment, as it has proven to us.

Marker's comments:

Koo ii, you have delivered a good response that has much insight and displays maturity of thought and good analysis. You are evidently aware of the issues in this question. Keep pushing for constant evaluation! Good job here!

**‘Pop music has no value beyond being a source of entertainment.’
What is your view?**

Nearly 25,000 songs are released each day in a plethora of languages and genres, deriving their tunes from various cultures around the world, and seeking to convey messages and perceptions of the artistes behind them. Yet, when we examine the top-selling lists of Billboard or iTunes, can we safely profess that all the pop tunes that have wormed into the ears and hearts of millions of users have value beyond being a source of entertainment? Listening to what used to be the top pop tracks on Spotify Singapore some may unsurprisingly seek to propose that such music has no real value beyond entertainment. Debut title “Boombayah” by Korean girl group BLACKPINK, whose chorus is loaded with more onomatopoeic sounds than lyrics, or seemingly meaningless Taiwanese love songs do not indeed seem to suggest that pop music has much value. Yet, such a view is often too myopic. We are simply judging pop music based on the deluge of beats and rhythms presented to us, failing to consider the deeper meanings behind each and every track. Hence, I believe that while pop music does offer entertainment, its value extends beyond this façade, into economic terms and into political and social commentary that can enact change and liberate groups.

Some detractors claim that pop music’s value stops at entertainment, and it is a valid stance to take, given how easy it is to see the reasons behind their proposition. In recent years, pop music has often become oversimplified, and too crass. Taking works like “Fendiman” by Jackson Wang or older hits like “Love Story” by Taylor Swift, we realise that much of the matter discussed are either nearly nonsensical, illogical, or focused on frivolous pursuits like love and lavish wealth. Remarkably, these very characteristics of pop music appeal to the masses, given that they are not complex and relatable, hence functioning as a source of entertainment for the average listener. Musically, some trained musicians have cast doubt on the substantiality of pop music, given the rudimentary and repetitive scales and chord progressions that, at the same time, make them memorable to the public. “What Makes You Beautiful” by English band One Direction only consists of three unique notes in the chorus, not to mention the lack of tonal variation in the remainder of the work. Evidently, such music is produced to cater to the lowest common denominator of society – to pander to the masses through its catchiness and addictive features. Such aspects allow the public to

indulge in pop music with ease, not only finding entertainment in listening to the artiste, but also in communicating and interacting with like-minded fans. This cannot be more accurately reflected in Korean pop, where each artiste is backed by separate fan groups who share daily updates, discuss their favourite tracks and engage in music streaming wars, reducing pop music to a trifling game of numbers and popularity. With pop music being diminished to a mere source of pleasure and joy for the listener, it is thus fair to claim that it does not possess any deeper intrinsic meaning or motivation, and it is the superficiality of pop music that has led most to believe it does not serve any real purpose beyond entertainment.

However, pop music has its own functions that should be lauded, most notably its economic potential. While pop stars may not be raking in the biggest pay checks out of all vocations, the amount artistes make is still phenomenal beyond expectation. Concerts, fan-meets, merchandise and many more are heavily marketed to fans, who devour them without further thought. For instance, Mandopop stars Jay Chou and Jolin Tsai are the names behind just a few of the various concerts that sell out within seconds, and are living lifestyles of immense luxury. The economic value transcends just personal wealth – the music industry employs producers, writers, make-up artists and stage directors, amongst many other occupations, in order to produce and release content. With the tremendous amount of investment that circulates inside the industry, as glimpsed from the booming Korean and Chinese pop scenes, this creates much needed employment and income for many other individuals and households alike. The economic impact of pop music also extends to other sectors such as fashion, where pop music stars such as Kris Wu and KUN are ambassadors of *haute couture* fashion houses to the likes of Burberry and Prada, boosting economic prosperity through purchases and investment in other industries. Pop music also plays a large part in a country's economy, as more fans seek to travel to countries like South Korea to fully immerse themselves in the Hallyu culture, drawing in billions of tourist dollars. Pop stars like EXO also seek to represent a country's identity, serving as cultural ambassadors in major international events like the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics to widen the country's projection of soft power through painting an image of a bustling arts and music hub. Such factors all serve as both measurable and immeasurable forms of economic catalyst, which are instrumental to a country's growth and development.

Pop music has also long been utilised as a form of social and political commentary. By leveraging the medium of pop music, artistes are able to make controversial issues more palatable and digestible to the wider audience. For instance, Childish Gambino's "This is America" is more than just a rap-laden work. It seeks to explore the lax gun laws in America that have resulted in unrest, as well as sheds light on police brutality

which many Americans are apathetic about. Billie Eilish shares about an uphill battle against depression in her work “idontwannabeyouanymore”, a topic considered taboo, especially in less mature societies. Meanwhile, closer to home, girl group F(x)’s “Red Light” is a heart-wrenching narration of the lacunae in maritime regulations that led to the eventual sinking of the Sewol Ferry in 2014, taking the lives of young and old alike. Lee Hi’s songs often portray her struggles in the cut-throat Korean music industry, sharing her discomfort in her work “Breathe”. Through pop music, artistes have found a contemporary medium that is welcomed by the masses to cleverly intertwine their opinions and champion their causes. The accessibility of pop music has made such intricacies in complex issues easier to visualise, and it offers listeners a transformative experience in which they are presented with first-hand, visceral representations of societal fissures that resonates with them emotionally. This serves as a rallying force that engenders support for change, which potentially is a powerful tool to challenge the status quo.

Lastly, pop music also serves as a voice for the oppressed and minority in every society. Where they may not have been afforded equality in other aspects, such as being marginalised based on socio-economic status, race or gender, individuals and groups alike find solace and respite in pop music, which is a non-discriminatory language. Pop music has been a vehicle for communication of the self and surroundings, as seen in Lizzo’s “Like A Girl” and Beyonce’s “If I Were A Boy”, where they spotlight the injustices faced by the female gender in terms of harsh societal standards and abuse under the patriarchy. Soul music has also long been a medium of expression for the black community in America. Hidden behind Aretha Franklin’s charming *melismas* are painful fragments of history that the African-American community has still not recovered from. Through portraying elements of their folk hymns and capturing songs of peasant slave farmers, the soul genre is an emotional memorialisation of severe racism that remains an all-too-common experience in the black community. Psychedelic pop, meanwhile, reflects the dark side of the American elite, in which children are placed under intense pressure to succeed and inherit the achievements of the previous generation. This led to disillusioned teens seeking comfort in psychedelic pop and rock, where they found themselves unrestrained, released from the shackles of expectations at home and society, as they pursued a vastly different lifestyle. Evidently, the non-discriminatory nature of pop music has allowed for the disenfranchised to voice out their struggles and battles, thereby enabling members of the same community to reach out and find a sense of rootedness and belonging as a collective. Ultimately, this paves the way for greater awareness of their plight and increasing acceptance for their identity.

In all, while pop music has admittedly seen itself catering to the whims and fancies of the public in an attempt to provide mere entertainment, we often let our judgement of such an introspective genre be clouded by the superficiality we perceive all pop music as having attained. From allowing the marginalised to giving voice to their woes and seek acceptance, to serving as astute commentary on political and social troubles, pop music has brought a different dimension to it with its accessibility as a universal language. Beyond that, pop music serves an indispensable economic role that should not be overlooked. Perhaps, we can stop colouring our view of pop music with our own pre-formed prejudice and learn to appreciate its value.

Marker's comments:

Well discussed, with an excellent range of examples and keen analysis – very good!

**How far would you agree that technological progress
has done more harm than good for gender equality?**

In her iconic piece of work, *The Second Sex*, early feminist and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir described how traditional society set up men to be the “subject” of society while women were the “other”, often seen as deficient, deformed versions of men. In this regard, I believe that she would be ecstatic to note how women in the 21st century have used technology to change the social dynamics in society and make themselves the subject of their own narratives. The paradigm shift that society underwent in the process of unlearning its flawed setup has truly been led by the boom in information technology, improving the access and reach that women have in society. While some might argue otherwise, I believe that technological progress has genuinely brought a positive change in gender dynamics across the world.

Critics of my stand might argue that the development of technology has given patriarchy yet another avenue by which to torment and disenfranchise women. More specifically, it is claimed that the Internet has become a cesspool of misogyny and hate against women. I will concede that there is some truth to this claim. The anonymous nature of the Internet has allowed misogynist messages to perpetuate all over the world with little to no consequences to any of the perpetrators. The Internet also provides fertile breeding ground for the formation of extremist echo chambers that reinforce the still-developing misogyny inside many minds. Given that the power dynamics of the offline world are often replicated in the online world, it is no surprise that the many power structures our society has been built upon extend their tendrils into the online world, and the consequences of the partnering of the power of new technology and existing power structures are insidious. Examples of this happening are a dime a dozen. Consider the GamerGate controversy in 2014, where the wrath of thousands of Internet trolls descended upon a small group of female video game critics, notably Anita Sarkeesian, founder of Feminist Frequency. The simple and harmless act of calling out and critiquing sexist tropes in media led to horrifying consequences: Sarkeesian was abused, trolled, doxxed, and even sent rape and death threats for her actions. More recently, popular singer Rihanna and teenage climate activist Greta

Thunberg were harassed online for tweeting about Indian farmers' protests¹. It is evident that wherever women go, harassment and abuse will follow, and technology simply amplifies the effect of misogyny in the world.

On the other hand, it is easily also argued that technology, specifically social media, has given disenfranchised groups a voice they never had before. Philosopher John Stuart Mills once argued that one of the reasons why patriarchy had lasted so long was that women who complained about their abuse were likely to face more abuse by the men in their lives due to their complaints. He also claimed that women as a class, despite being 50% of the population, shared no solidarity on account of their womanhood, and were often separated by other identity markers. For example, a rich woman would more likely identify with a rich man over a poor woman. The expanse of the Internet and social media has provided solutions for both of these issues. The anonymity provided by the Internet has given women a safe space to speak about the oppression they face, while social media algorithms has done the job of bringing together and forging solidarity between women from different social backgrounds all over the world. One of the biggest social media phenomena of the digital age resulting from this would be the #MeToo movement in 2017. Started by Tarana Burke, it snowballed into a massive, worldwide movement where women could share their experiences about sexual harassment. The heart-wrenching solidarity shown by women uniting over the brutish injustice they faced left a very clear message to the world: sexual harassment would not be tolerated in this day and age. Compared to the slight mobilisation yet lack of spread and effect following the trial of Anita Hill in the late 20th century², it is clear that social media has bridged the gap between women – be it age, country, or status – and has led to the mobilisation of a generation against gender inequality.

Technological progress has also allowed the atrocities against women to be documented in a way that was never possible before. The widespread usage of photography and videography has allowed women to document the misbehaviour they face in their everyday lives. The development of forensic techniques such as DNA evidence and blood spatter analysis has also made it much easier for women to prove their claims of assault and abuse. The most famous example of the documentation of discrimination being brought to life would be how ex-US President Donald Trump was recorded admitting to sexually harassing and assaulting women. Such forms of discreet recording were not so easily available or accessible in the 20th century. In societies that traditionally have no respect for women's stories and struggle with giving women

¹ "Tens of thousands of farmers have been protesting on the borders of the capital Delhi for more than two months against new laws that will loosen the rules around the sale, pricing and storage of agricultural produce." ("Farmers' protest: Why did a Rihanna tweet prompt Indian backlash?" – BBC News, 4 Feb 2021)

² In 1991, American lawyer and academic Anita Hill accused her supervisor and US Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment.

basic credibility, the ability of women to use technology to document their experiences makes their experiences undeniable – and justice a higher possibility instead of a faraway dream.

Lastly, I believe that technological progress has allowed for an increase in the standard of living for women all around the globe, giving them access to an unending ocean of resources, making the situation in some countries better and fairer for women. The technological boom in the last 25 years has brought an infinite amount of scientific and healthcare advances. The development of safer healthcare procedures for women (e.g. in legalised abortion), birth control or cheaper methods of production of sanitary napkins has granted women more freedom from the conditions that previously disallowed them the opportunity to develop and grow. Significantly, the advances in contraception have made it possible for women to gain an education or work without having to worry about unwanted pregnancies. Cheaper methods of sanitary napkins developed in rural areas in India have allowed young girls to go to school even when they are having their period. The availability of free resources on the Internet has allowed women to free themselves from dangerous situations, such as abusive relationships, giving them the ability to develop themselves further as individuals. In all, the development of technology has freed women of the chains they were previously restricted by and given them the wings they need to fly and reach unimaginable heights. Countries with access to abortion services and contraception, for example, tend to have lower death rates among women, proving that technological progress can level the playing field and ensure that we are on the path of eradicating gender inequality.

To conclude, there is no doubt that technology and innovation have given the tools to break the chains of their oppressors and make their presence known in the world. Perhaps one day, Simone de Beauvoir's chilling insights on gender relations will no longer be true and women will be free to be the subject of their own narratives.

Marker's comments:

It's clear that you're well-versed in the topic. The language used was also highly riveting. Moving forward, a better analysis of the examples needed. Analysis of examples will need to clearly show how technology has had an impact on gender equality. One area for improvement is to show, through the example, how certain features of technology have contributed to the impact on gender equality. What this means is that we need to frame the examples in a way that shows how gender equality is attained and not just how there is a general improvement of the lives of women.

‘People, rather than the government, should be responsible for their own well-being.’ Comment.

As Abraham Lincoln once said, “Democracy is a government of the people, by the people and for the people”. With many of those in power being voted in by those in the community who have chosen to place their trust in them, it is no surprise that the governments of countries around the world should have their citizens’ best interests at heart. This comes not only from the power that has been vested in them by the majority, but also from a civic duty to look after those under their charge. In various if not all spheres of society, the government invariably holds a certain degree of influence, more so than individuals in the areas of equality, ensuring sustainable growth and providing a secure environment for citizens to thrive and flourish in. The government, therefore, can be the one to create more impactful change that better improves citizens’ standard of living. For these reasons, I do believe that the government ultimately should have greater responsibility for the citizens’ well-being, rather than the citizens themselves.

However, some sceptics may argue against this, citing that despite the government’s efforts, it ultimately comes down to the people and whether or not they are accepting of the reforms and aid that the government has sought to provide. As much as the government desires to provide its citizens with the best possible support (both tangible and intangible) within its means, people may not be receptive to such help or are strongly against what the government has done for them. The government can do many things, but the final determination of their actions’ effectiveness rests in the people’s hands. For example, the governments in many Western countries have chosen to place drug offenders in rehabilitation facilities as opposed to sentencing them to receive capital punishment. While this may prove effective for some, it heavily depends on individuals, who will need to remain sober not only for themselves but also for society at large, so that crimes rates can be lowered and stronger familial bonds can be forged. The government has chosen to spend more resources in coming up with fresh solutions as opposed to traditional methods of legislation as a means to an end in the hope of better outcomes for the people, but it is evident that the people themselves have to recognise the need for them to take charge of their well-being, and

fulfil a crucial role in ensuring this can be achieved. After all, it does take two hands to clap in all situations.

Nonetheless, there is a need to look beyond this and have a more macroscopic view of the issues at hand: that the government undisputedly has a greater purpose of tackling systemic inequality for all through legislation and policies, which is something the citizens are unable to carry out but is fundamental to ensuring their well-being. As countries and societies become more progressive and interconnected today, it has brought to light many issues surrounding inequality that have been deeply rooted for decades or even centuries. These issues have previously gone unaddressed, such as pervasive gender inequality, which has also led to income inequality. In Singapore, women earn roughly \$640,000 less than men over the course of their careers, despite having the same job qualifications. This is due to the age-old perception that women should be confined to domestic household roles. This income disparity not only highlights how women are devalued and exploited by their employers, but also affects their material standard of living, where lower incomes mean that they are less able to spend on goods and services in comparison to men. They are disadvantaged in various aspects of life simply because of their gender in the largely patriarchal societies that we live in, which is something that can be addressed easily by the government through reforms. For example, the Singapore government has granted fathers parental leave when their wives give birth, encouraging males to have an equal role to play when it comes to caregiving such that women can work as well, moving away from the mindset that males are the sole breadwinners in households. The government, through other means such as taxation, could also choose to modify existing taxation systems to tax the rich more and the poor less, to reduce and bridge the gaps in income inequality so as to prevent the phenomenon of “the rich get(ting) richer while the poor get(ting) poorer”. Clearly, a top-down approach by the government in changing laws in the pursuit of equality can grant minorities much more power and a better standard of living qualitatively and quantitatively, and this can be achieved simply because the government has a greater say and the ability to make concrete modifications to society as compared to the public. Thus, the government should be more responsible than the people for their well-being.

Furthermore, the government’s choices can have a ripple effect on citizens, where the people are the ones who bear the brunt of the government’s choices, at times without a choice, so the government does impact the citizens’ quality of life significantly. This implies that the government has to ensure all-round societal progress at all times, which would benefit citizens the most. The government’s responsibilities lie in ensuring that the country as a whole can reach new heights in terms of development and not remain stagnant in terms of their growth. For example, China’s decision to increase

the production levels in its domestic factories and export more goods globally has allowed it to surpass other countries and become the second-largest world economy. The exponential growth it has seen has led to substantial increases in national income, which can then be channelled by the government to improve societal infrastructure such as healthcare and education. These improvements allow the people to develop and prepare themselves for the future, ensuring that they are healthy enough to do so and thereby impacting future generations positively as well. This trickle-down effect emphasises the fact that governments' choices have far-reaching impact that will be experienced by the people, and at times it is inevitable that the people have little option as it is a situation that is out of their hands, but they simply have to go with the government's direction. The well-being of the people is something that cannot be achieved with a narrow-minded government, and as seen from the Chinese's example, good governance and foresight are key to secure this, further supporting the view that the government should have greater responsibility for their citizens' welfare.

Lastly, the government has a basic societal role to play in ensuring the safety and security of the people, which is a key component in measuring their sense of well-being. Corruption and poor enforcement of laws in countries such as India have led to much distrust of those in power, which severely compromises their well-being as they have the tendency not to surface their needs to the government or their voices go unheard. To them, the government is unreliable and untrustworthy, evident in the skyrocketing crime rates, highlighting how the authorities do not genuinely have the people's best interests at heart. This is in stark contrast to a country such as Singapore, which is hailed as one of the safest and least corrupt countries in the world as seen from global rankings annually. The people's basic needs such as healthcare and housing are met, such that they can be secure in this knowledge to go on in their pursuits of other things in life to meet their psychological and emotional needs (as posited by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs), as part of their welfare improvement through enriching experiences such as travelling. In view of the Covid-19 situation, the government in Singapore has managed to enact various schemes to protect its citizens against the virus' impact, even in financial and psychological areas. This has led to pre-pandemic a daily life being able to resume to some extent with low community transmissions, while in other countries such as the US the situation continues to be dire with a bleak outlook due to a lack of proper governmental management of the virus outbreak. The American people, especially the impoverished, are also suffering from a lack of resources to meet their physiological needs, testament to how the US government has failed in its basic duty. This reinforces the idea that the government undoubtedly has to be able to give citizens a sense of security and safety as part of the responsibility entrusted to them by the people, which then allows citizens to move forward and achieve a better state of well-being.

At the end of the day, the governments in countries around the world all have the same duty of doing right by those who have granted them their positions in the first place, including making sure that the people are empowered to live lives that are fulfilling and that their needs are met. The government's sphere of influence is undoubtedly far-reaching; therefore, they should capitalise on and make full use of this in ensuring the contentment of those under them. However, it is important to also note the fact that the people should not take things for granted and expect the government to do all the work for them, but to partner with the government and work hand in hand with them to secure better lives for themselves both now and in the years to come.

Marker's comments:

Kathlyn, I enjoyed reading the essay. Your grasp of the government's roles and responsibilities is good. Moving forward, I think you might want to challenge yourself and expand your understanding of the government's roles beyond just social and economic aspects. What about the government's roles in citizens' health (physical and mental)?

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